

# quick facts

## ***About...Pneumococcal Infections***

### **What are pneumococcal infections?**

Pneumococcal infections are caused by the bacterium *Streptococcus pneumoniae*. These infections include pneumonia, bacteremia (infection in the blood), meningitis, sinus infections, and ear infections (otitis media), and are most common during the winter months. Anyone can become infected, but children less than 5 years of age, the elderly, and any individuals with weakened immune systems are at the greatest risk of becoming seriously ill. Pneumonia is a leading cause of death in the elderly.

### **What are the symptoms?**

Many people have pneumococcal bacteria in their bodies without having symptoms. Symptoms usually develop within 1-3 days following exposure and may include:

- Chills
- Fever
- Cough
- Sneezing
- Chest pain
- “Rusty” looking phlegm
- Ear pressure or ear pain
- Sinus drainage or sinus pain

Persons with meningitis may experience fever, headache, sensitivity to light, and loss of alertness.

### **How are pneumococcal infections spread?**

The bacteria are spread from person to person by direct contact with secretions from an infected person’s nose or throat. Coughing and sneezing by an infected individual can spread the infection. However, in most cases, pneumococcal disease is not easily spread from one person to another. On rare occasions, outbreaks have occurred in settings where people live or work very closely together, such as daycare centers and correctional facilities.

### **Who is at risk for pneumococcal infections?**

Children under two years of age, the elderly, African Americans, American Indians, Alaska Natives, children who attend group day care centers, and persons with underlying medical conditions (such as HIV or sickle-cell anemia) are at increased risk for pneumococcal infections. Risk of infection is decreased with proper pneumococcal vaccination.

### **How do I know if I have a pneumococcal infection?**

See your healthcare provider if you have been exposed to someone with a pneumococcal infection or if you have symptoms that match those described above. Many other organisms can cause these same symptoms.

### **How are pneumococcal infections treated?**

Pneumococcal infections can be successfully treated with appropriate antibiotics. However, pneumococcal bacteria are becoming increasingly resistant to antibiotics. If you have a serious pneumococcal infection, your health care provider may run special tests to make sure you receive the right medication.

You can help prevent drug resistance by taking the following steps:

- Take antibiotics only when prescribed by your health care provider.
- Take **all** doses **exactly** as described.
- Do not take medication prescribed for anyone else.
- Do not ask your health care provider for antibiotics to treat viral infections, such as colds or influenza (the flu).

### **How can pneumococcal infections be prevented?**

Currently, two safe and effective vaccines are available to prevent pneumococcal infections. One is available for children ages 2 months through 4 years and is now recommended as part of routine childhood vaccinations. Another vaccine is available for persons over 65 years of age and persons with weakened immune systems. All persons over age 65 are especially encouraged to have this vaccine to prevent pneumococcal pneumonia. See your health care provider to determine which vaccine is right for you or your child.

People who have been exposed to someone with a pneumococcal infection usually do not need to take medication themselves. The following hygiene habits will help prevent the spread of infection:

- Wash hands frequently and thoroughly, especially after coughing, sneezing, or caring for someone who is ill.
- Cough or sneeze into your upper sleeve.

- Discard used tissues and wash your hands.
- Do not share personal items, such as toothbrushes.

All information presented is intended for public use. For more information, please refer to: <http://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/vpd-vac/pneumo/in-short-both.htm>.

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